

Part Three

The Interviews

CHAPTER TEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH HUANG SHUNXING¹

by
Dai Qing

Dai Qing: In 1985 you returned to China by way of Japan. Were you, at that time, aware of the ecological crisis confronting the mainland and the detrimental impact of the Three Gorges project on the environment?

Huang Shunxing: For 40 years or so, people in Taiwan have been deprived of information about the mainland. Therefore, to tell you the truth, I was not well informed about the situation here. The available information was of two extremes: on the one hand, there was the anti-communist propaganda of the Nationalists, for example, "the red bandits are vicious and the masses live in bitterness"; on the other hand, there was the news carried through the grapevine by leftist youth—describing that the mainland was an ideal society. No one ever raised the issue of the environment. It reminds me of what happened in Taiwan years ago, when everyone was so enthusiastic about economic development that they ignored the environmental impacts of unbridled economic growth. Even those who thought about the environment did not dare mention it, nor point out the inevitable destructive effects of focusing solely on growth at the expense of the environment. At

¹ Huang Shunxing was born in Zhanghua, Taiwan. From 1964 to 1969, he was a freely elected county executive in Taiwan and from 1972 to 1980 a freely elected member of the judiciary. Since 1988, he has been a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. He is founder of the magazine *Life and Environment*. His major works include: *A Journey Around the Globe*, *Testimony to History*, *The Future of Agriculture in Taiwan*, *A View of the Mainland*, *Endless Road*, and *What I Saw in Beijing*. This interview, conducted in 1993, was not part of the original Chinese edition of *Yangtze! Yangtze!*

a 1985 environmental symposium held by the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago, I met Professor Lin Junyi, a native of Taiwan residing in the United States. He first brought the serious environmental problems in China to my attention. From that point on, I became very concerned and once I had the opportunity to visit the mainland I saw the severity of the problems right away.

Dai Qing: Since you reside in an area far from where forests are disappearing and rivers are drying up, why are so concerned with these issues? They have little impact on your daily life?

Huang Shunxing: The environment is an issue that affects the entire planet. It knows no national boundaries. I myself am Chinese, and mainland China is part of the motherland. No matter how long I have been away from her, I am always part of her.

Dai Qing: Soon after you arrived you began to tour the country. When did you begin to be concerned about the Three Gorges project?

Huang Shunxing: Not long after I arrived. At that time, the assessment of the project had already begun and both the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) were debating the project's launch. In order to ascertain the truth, I began to collect data.

Dai Qing: How did you feel at that time? Did you feel that this grand project would bring glory to the Chinese people?

Huang Shunxing: It is hollow words like "grand and magnificent" that cause us problems. In terms of "grandness," no matter whether we are discussing the Aswan dam in Egypt or the Mississippi river project in the United States, dam projects lacking serious analysis and done in haste should not be undertaken. It usually takes a million years for a river to cut a channel and establish its drainage. In China, where the population density is high, the impact of a large dam collapse or a nuclear power station failure would be beyond our imagination. Therefore, in principle, I absolutely oppose such "grand" undertakings.

There is no question that we must develop our economy. However, before we build such a grand project we must first ask whether we need so much electrical power. Second, we must examine all possible alternatives. Third, even if no alternatives are available, we must first consider the environmental and social

impacts of the project.² The Three Gorges project should be considered from these three perspectives.

Dai Qing: As a member of the Standing Committee of the NPC, were you provided with easy access to materials and information by the NPC, the Ministry of Water Resources, and the Yangtze Valley Planning Office (YVPO), to aid you in assessing the project at the 1992 NPC meeting? Prior to this meeting, the NPC sent a Three Gorges Project Inspection Group to inspect the project area. Since your concern about the dam is well known, were you invited to participate in that tour?

Huang Shunxing: Prior to the NPC meeting, I knew absolutely nothing about the inspection tour. In fact, I didn't learn about it until the group returned and announced on television its support for the proposed early launching of the project. A few other members of the Standing Committee who have expressed similar concerns about the project have also indicated that they were not informed of the inspection group's existence. Hearing the news, I telephoned the Secretariat of the NPC and was told that they had not informed me of the tour because they assumed that I was not in good health. I asked how they knew anything about my physical condition. The person at the Secretariat only mumbled an incomprehensible reply. Later, I heard that all of the members of the inspection group had been appointed. The majority of them were non-specialists and therefore, naturally, did not come up with any opposition views.

Dai Qing: At the NPC meeting in 1992, the resolution on the Three Gorges project was on the agenda. Is it correct to assume that this helped you to gain an understanding of the project?

Huang Shunxing: Absolutely not. They set up various obstacles to my learning about the project and were unwilling to provide the most basic data on the assessment. Over the past few decades, few project proposals, large or small—from breweries to nuclear power stations—have been submitted to the NPC for

² For an extensive discussion of environmental impacts of large-scale dams, see E. Goldsmith and N. Hildyard, eds., *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, 3 vols. (Cornwall, U.K.: Wadebridge Ecological Centre, 1984-92).

approval. Why was this particular project singled out for NPC consideration? This was peculiar.

At the meeting, they tried every which way to get the project approved. I told the Secretariat of the NPC that since I had read all the "positive" materials in support of the project, I wanted to see data concerning the other side of the argument. Both sides, I emphasized, should be examined. They replied that the Taiwan delegation had a copy of the material delineating the opposition views, but that I could only borrow it. I then pointed out the elaborate effort made to promote the positive side of the argument. Each delegate was presented with several pounds of materials supporting the project! Yet the materials outlining the opposition views consisted only of a few pamphlets that had not been made available to all of the delegates. I noted that it is the delegates who vote and must therefore understand the over all situation. Perhaps some were willing to give up that right, but I told them that I would never do so. I demanded my own copy of the opposition materials and told the Secretariat to do everything possible to secure me a copy.

Since I was afraid that they would ignore my request, I made a few copies of the pamphlets on my own and distributed them to delegates who had expressed an interest in learning about the opposition views, including Liu Caipin, a Taiwan delegate. Later, when I showed up at another session of the meeting, a member of the Secretariat gave me a copy of the opposition pamphlets that I was told had been especially prepared for me. I indicated that I didn't want such special treatment: "Understanding the overall situation is the basic right of every delegate," I stressed.

Dai Qing: Without written materials how could the opposition's views ever be given due consideration? Or had experts holding such views been invited to the meeting?

Huang Shunxing: The experts invited to introduce the project were all from the Ministry of Water Resources and the YVPO, all of whom, of course, support the dam. Although members of the Taiwan delegation did not raise that many questions, they did express their opposition views. Fan Zengsheng, vice-director of the Shanghai Area Port Facility, mentioned that once the project was completed, the sedimentation problem at the mouth of the Yangtze River would intensify. He also raised the possibility of longer waiting periods for ships to pass through the Three Gorges

shiplocks. Liu Caipin noted the inadequacy of scientific data garnered in the assessment, the closed nature of the debate, and the problem of inaccurate budgets. After studying all the available data from the assessment, I also asked a few questions. Why don't the budget figures (Y57 billion) include interest costs, I asked. If these costs are incorporated, what does the total budget for the project come to?

In addition, I also posed questions concerning the life-span of the reservoir, ways for dealing with earthquakes or other natural disasters, the threat to rare species, and the submersion of important historical relics. Although these questions were directed to the entire body, only one person responded, the director of the YVPO. Some of my questions he did not answer, especially those on the budget and fund raising. Others, he responded to simply by reading from the agenda items. Still others he simply ignored.

Dai Qing: Under such conditions was it possible for the project to be approved? Of course, I assume that people like yourself who are willing to pose questions and take action do not constitute the majority of the delegates.

Huang Shunxing: You're quite right. During the panel discussions, I tried to contact other delegates as much as possible to help them understand the entire issue. I also made copies of the opposition pamphlets that the NPC Secretariat refused to distribute. However, it turned out that I could not even give out these materials since, according to the rules of the meeting, delegates from different regions were prevented from having mutual contact. All materials had to be channeled through the Secretariat assigned to each delegation and so there was no question where they would end up.

Dai Qing: Although Deng Xiaoping has stated that to avoid making mistakes, the Party should be more open, listening to the masses' opinions, and Zhao Ziyang emphasized that important issues must be discussed by the people, it appears that the abstract "people" have been kept in the dark. At that time, did you feel there was any opportunity to get opposition views across to the majority of delegates through legitimate channels?

Huang Shunxing: Many years ago, during the Mao era, I would have thought it difficult. But given that during my first two years as a member of the NPC Standing Committee, I drafted several proposals for the Bureau of the NPC Secretariat to ensure

that opposition views could be voiced, including the proposal at the second session of the fifth NPC Standing Committee to allow journalists to enter the conference hall to conduct interviews, I no longer felt that way. At that time, I argued that the NPC was China's supreme legislative organ similar to deliberative bodies in other modern countries. Whoever heard of a legislature that refused journalists the right to conduct interviews? Does it make sense for issues that are discussed by the legislative body not to be broadcast to the public? And, why is it that delegates are kept ignorant of the views of the people? Without such procedures, how can we say that the NPC is truly representative? In order to establish such give and take, media people are definitely needed. Why is it that almost all the countries in the world, including the Chiang K'ai-shek regime on Taiwan, allow journalists to interview delegates, and the People's Republic does not?

When Zhao Ziyang was still in charge he proposed "transparency" for the people's representative bodies. At that time, Wan Li was also quite open-minded. In fact, he passed on my opinions to the higher authorities. And indeed, from the third session of the fifth NPC onward, they allowed journalists to enter the NPC conference hall.

During an adjournment of the third session, a journalist came to me and asked if I would like to talk with him. I asked if he was requesting an interview and if so, would it be publicized. He said no, for although a few newspapers were allowed to send observers to the meeting (without conducting interviews), reports would still be under the control of the NPC. I replied that if that was the case, then there was no need for me to talk with him. But he insisted, indicating that his report would be published in the *Internal Reference*. When I told him that I had never heard of this publication he explained that it was so important that only VIPs had access to it. I replied: "I am the people. And the people are supreme. We serve the people. The external reference is more important than the internal one. I'm sorry but I simply cannot accept such interviews."

Dai Qing: Your proposal of allowing journalists to enter the conference hall and conduct interviews had a great social impact. Did you make other proposals?

Huang Shunxing: Another proposal was the procedural regulations approved in 1989. Originally, NPC meetings did not

allow speeches at the conference level (i.e., to the entire legislative body). I argued that no matter what happened at the smaller panel discussions, giving speeches at the conference level was the last opportunity for the delegates to express themselves. That right must not be taken away. I remember that I was very persistent, and a few other members also supported my proposal. At that time, Zhao Ziyang was still in power, and so eventually it was approved.

Dai Qing: Did the regulations play a role at later meetings? For instance, at the meeting held in March, 1992, at which the Three Gorges resolution was voted on?

Huang Shunxing: According to item 54 of the regulations, delegates who wish to give a speech at the meeting must first register with the Secretariat, and then the chairman sets aside time for the speech. Delegates who wish to make impromptu speeches from the floor can do so once they are recognized by the chairman, first for 10 minutes, and then a second time for five minutes. The chairman is obligated to allow those who register ahead of time to speak. Only those who decide to speak from the floor can be ignored and kept from speaking. I was determined to speak and registered to speak on March 31. I hoped for the best but prepared for the worst.

Dai Qing: How did things go at the meeting?

Huang Shunxing: Seeing that the first and second items on the agenda had already been approved, I knew the Three Gorges project would be voted on next. At this point, I took a dose of my medicine—you see I am not in particularly good health as I have a pacemaker and it's dangerous if I get too excited. I was not allowed to speak before the voting. I raised my hand, requesting to speak, but was ignored by the chairman. I stood up anyway and at this point, I heard a journalist from Taiwan shout: "No sound! No Sound!" At first, I didn't know what had happened, but later I learned that the entire sound system in the meeting hall had been shut down, with the exception of the chairman's microphone. How dare the NPC cut off the power to prevent delegates from exercising their rights? It was then that I decided to protest by walking out of the meeting. I walked to the lobby and in no time, I was surrounded by journalists. I gave them the materials I had prepared and talked just as if it was a press conference.

Dai Qing: Why were you treated that way? Hadn't you simply reminded the government to take adequate precautions for the sake of both the nation and the people in carrying out such a huge project?

Huang Shunxing: Indeed, I myself didn't understand it, either. How could the government and the NPC, in order to stop a delegate from speaking, blatantly violate the constitutional right in front of the entire country and the world? I assume that certain people were afraid my speech would be detrimental to their project. But if their motive was really to serve the interests of the nation and the people, then what would it matter if they listened to other opinions? There was no need for them to act like that! Most opposition was raised on technical points. If you are confident on these matters, why fear others speaking out?

Dai Qing: You hit the nail on the head: their greatest insecurity is in the technical area.

Huang Shunxing: Then, what was the purpose in having the project approved by coercion if they were so unsure of it? As far as I am concerned, their aim is to hold the NPC responsible, especially if anything goes wrong in the future. It was, after all, the NPC that approved the project. And what's their motive for doing that? Do they really think they can avoid responsibility? Everybody and every matter will be judged by history.

Dai Qing: Later, I heard that in great anger you made a decision regarding your position with the NPC.

Huang Shunxing: Yes, in the lobby one of the journalists, asked: "Do you intend to continue as a member of the Standing Committee of the NPC?" "No," I replied. "I want to resign now!" As soon as I said it, I sensed the question was asked on purpose. I asked: "Which newspaper do you work for?" He refused to tell me. I assume that he was from the Xinhua News Agency.

Dai Qing: Your public announcement was the outcome some were hoping for, while it leaves the common people with a sense of pity. Did you say it out of anger?

Huang Shunxing: No. In fact, I thought of resigning long ago and I had actually submitted my resignation on several occasions.

Dai Qing: Did you feel that what the Party did was too outrageous or have you just lost hope in the system?

Huang Shunxing: From my own perspective, I am disappointed in the system. No matter how hard I try, after 50 years, the

situation is the same, for all the troubles I have encountered stem from the system. And such problems cannot be solved by one person. I feel that I should no longer waste my time here. I am 70 years old, and it is time that I resigned from public positions. I had planned to resign when I fulfilled my term this year; thus my resignation was not simply out of anger.

Dai Qing: The resolution on the Three Gorges project has been passed, and according to the propaganda in the newspapers, things are now being accelerated. What can you say about the future of this project?

Huang Shunxing: The environmental situation in China is extremely dicey and the Three Gorges project is only one of many problems. Projects whose impacts will be even more serious are being promoted and developed. If efforts are not made to rescue the situation now, it will soon be too late.

Overpopulation is the most serious problem facing China today. With overpopulation come low levels of education, and these, in turn affect the quality of government. Poorly educated people form governments composed of corrupt officials who seek only personal privilege. Also, the system of government is key. Without a legal system and a proper separation of powers, the Chinese nation will soon die.³

There have been some small but interesting developments in the Three Gorges project recently. A report was published (in June) in the *People's Daily* based on interviews with the soon to be relocated people of Sandouping. There was another article published in *Metropolitan Youth* describing how funds for population relocation from the Three Gorges area had been used for socializing and entertaining. Also, a sub-project of the Three Gorges dam was supposed to receive Y800 million in funding this year. But by the end of June only Y100 million had been allocated. Without adequate funding, how can the project be launched? Since pro-dam officials are so supportive of the project, it seems that the only reasonable thing to do would be to print as much money as possible.

³ In *China on the Edge*, He Bochuan makes essentially the same argument.

These two situations (the use of project funds for recreational purposes and the inadequate allocation of funds to a Three Gorges sub-project) occurred after Li Peng fell ill early in 1993, when he reportedly suffered a heart attack. That, to me, was no coincidence. With things under tight control, the information contained in the two newspaper articles could not have been reported. How can you plan a project and then not provide adequate funds? To me, this is a very important sign, indicating that certain changes have taken place within the internal power structure.

Have you noticed that Three Gorges project bonds are no longer being issued? Why did this effort at fund raising apparently fail? In my opinion, once the bonds are issued, the bond holders should have the right to be informed about the over all budgetary situation. This knowledge will make it more difficult to suppress the voices of opposition. Then, because the opposition can express its views, the potential bond buyers will be scared off. Dam proponents have created a vicious circle.

Some Taiwanese companies wanted to join in financing the project, but they hesitated when they became aware of the opposition's views, including my own direct admonition: "Don't make evil money, let alone money that will never be made." Thus, with the various difficulties involved in fund raising, this project will be blocked for a period of time in which we can make our opposition more explicit. So, to answer your question regarding the future of the project, I think that there is a bit of hope. If people in positions of authority are wise and follow the principle of seeking truth from facts, and if officials in the financial sector are hesitant to take risks, then the Y100 million fund will be left dangling there, and will be little used. It is still not too late to halt the project, especially now that public opinion has become more averse. If the inadequate funding and the exposure of the truth about the project are part and parcel of one message, I feel there is still hope that we can halt this disaster.